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## **International Education: the transformative potential of experiential learning**

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### **Abstract**

Academic outcomes of post-16 education can be understood in terms of their value for gaining access to university and, at a time when global educational mobility is growing, internationally recognized university entrance qualifications may be considered a form of personal capital. However, narrowly measured outcomes may not reflect the breadth of the school experience nor the extent to which this breadth contributes to the development of the young person. One curriculum which aims to prepare students in ways that extend beyond the academic is the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, which incorporates an experiential element at its core. Creativity, Activity, Service attaches a transformative purpose to education, where students' experiences in each of the three strands can support personal learning that is not confined to subject areas of an academic curriculum. This paper describes the evolution of CAS in the academically rigorous Diploma Programme and presents the findings from a review of literature which contributes towards developing an understanding of the transformative potential of this component.

Key words: international education; International Baccalaureate; experiential learning; Creativity, Activity, Service

### **International Education and the International Baccalaureate**

What is international education? What does it look like and where is it found? These are questions difficult to answer, which may appear surprising in an era of global mobility, digital interconnectedness and the bringing to bear of post-Fordism market forces into the international education economy (Brown & Lauder, 1996). At school level, Hayden and Thompson (2013) offer a taxonomy that distinguishes the rapidly growing number of international schools – where one form of international education may be found – by the grounds upon which they were established, outlining the difference between schools founded for pragmatic purposes, as social mobility levers, or for ideological purposes. This taxonomy provides useful clarity at an organisational level, but what of the outcomes of a school education which describes itself in any way as international? One outcome can be understood in relation to the award of a qualification of international renown that is offered by many

international schools: facilitating entrance to universities outside home nations can function as "cosmopolitan capital" (Tarc, 2013 2) for those ascribing to the belief that education is an economic investment with economic benefits. Strong competition for entrance into well-respected higher education establishments in the world can be linked to the aim of securing jobs in prestigious companies (Clifford & Montgomery, 2014). The phenomenon of transnational education which, according to Waibel, Rüger, Ette, and Sauer (2017), includes all temporary studying abroad periods during secondary and post-secondary education, is widely perceived to make impressive additions to an international CV in preparation to compete for high-status university places or careers that reach higher income brackets, even though the actual benefits may be small or non-existent. Nonetheless, the highly competitive market of global higher education establishments features prominently as a destination of many young people aged 16-19 who have aspirations, or whose family have aspirations on their behalf, for the competitive edge anticipated as arising from globally recognized qualifications. One programme increasingly favoured by such students is the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP), a high-stakes, internationally-recognized university entrance qualification requiring study of a broad range of six subjects as well as completion of other compulsory components (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2016b). The academically demanding aspects of the curriculum contribute to points scores for university admission: the higher the score the more university options are available. According to Bunnell (2012 54) the IB aims to educate 2.5 million students by 2020 through its four programmes: Primary Years Programme (ages 4-11), Middle Years Programme (ages 11-16), Career-related Programme (ages 16-19) and (the longest established) Diploma Programme (ages 16-19), the academic element of the pre-university Diploma Programme may help to reinforce understanding of international education as cosmopolitan capital (Tarc, 2009). The origins of the IB can be found in the internationalism of the early twentieth century and have been well documented elsewhere (Peterson, 2003). Some of the earliest international educative efforts were closely connected with shaping young people to embody principles of goodwill, understanding and peace between nations (Sylvester, 2015). The International School of Peace in Boston, established in 1910, intended to "educate 'the peoples of all nations to a full knowledge of the waste and destruction of war and of preparation for war, its evil effects on present social generations and to promote international justice and the brotherhood of man'" according to Scott (as cited by Sylvester, 2015: 18). The ambition of this educative aim may ring ominously when its publication date is observed, but the hope for a more peaceful world based on international understanding is one of the abiding elements which has continued to infuse the development of international education to the present day. As Tarc has observed:

"Twentieth-century conceptions of international education have been deeply informed by the devastation produced out of war." (Tarc, 2009 251)

First fully examined in 1970 following development work in which teachers from the International School of Geneva played a major role (Peterson, 2003), the IB Diploma Programme, designed for 16-19 year olds, adopted an experiential learning approach, variously described as contributing to the tensions inherent in the aims and purposes of the IB (Tarc, 2009) or as an "act of faith" (Walker, 2011 7). The aim of promoting international understanding infuses the elements of the IBDP, including the core element of Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) which, through a transformative process of holistic personal development, requires students to experience activities in each of these three strands. CAS is a programme of experiential education devised to encourage the transformation of children into adults who will participate in creating a better, more peaceful world through intercultural understanding (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2016a). Along with those of the other two core elements, the Theory of Knowledge and the Extended Essay, it is intended that CAS experiences will lead to global issues making a tangible impact on students' understanding of the world through non-formal, non-academic experiences working holistically to elevate students' understanding of world issues in a way that, for example, reading books or participating in lessons could not. Through creativity and activity, it is argued, IBDP students will extend themselves intellectually and physically whilst, in the Service element, they may encounter people and issues first hand through collaborative and reciprocal engagement with the community in response to an authentic need (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2015).

The IB's focus on educating students to understand those of other countries, it was argued, will potentially reduce the more parochial forms of thinking which lead to war. To date, however, there has been limited research to underpin this claim. This review of literature seeks to contextualize CAS by setting out the foundations for including an experiential element in the IBDP, identifying what is currently understood about experiential learning and considering its transformative potential in relation to the IB mission of encouraging its students to be compassionate, lifelong learners who can actively contribute to a better world.

### Experience therapy

A progressive educator credited with having directly influenced the development of CAS in the earliest days of the IB Diploma was Kurt Hahn (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2009; Peterson, 2003). In attendance at one of the earliest meetings of Heads of International Schools, considered by some to be one of the earliest events in the international education movement (Hill, 2010), Hahn believed experience was integral to education, as is evident in his educational association with Salem

school in Germany, Gordonstoun in Scotland, Outward Bound, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and Atlantic College in Wales. The international network of 'Round Square' schools declare themselves guided by his educational philosophy (Round Square, 2017) although Hahn has no philosophical oeuvre; rather, he was concerned about the impact on children from an education system which he felt valued scholars and sportsmen, leaving others feeling that their interests and passions were unimportant (Kurt Hahn, 1934). Deriving educational convictions from his personal experience, as a child suffering illness and as an adult involved in the political negotiations at Versailles after World War 2 (Sutcliffe, 2012), his "will to peace" (Rohrs, 1966 22) motivated Hahn to work to mitigate the physical and moral weaknesses which failed to prevent war. For Hahn, modern life offered diminished opportunities to fulfil social responsibilities, fostering in the young a "non-committal attitude" (31), and he believed that action was an essential part of education for students discovering new aspects to themselves (van Oord, 2010). Hahn's vehicle for such self-discovery was a programme of what he described as 'experience therapy' which included practical activities as well as classroom instruction. Students could test their capabilities in realistic, non-simulated situations and become actively responsible, "selfless and capable of enthusiasm" (Rohrs, 1966 21). Hahn particularly valued two key experiences: "the urge to rescue ... [and] service of one's neighbour in his hour of need" (K. Hahn, 1954) where 'neighbour' for Hahn was a term with a distinctly international reach (Rohrs, 1966).

Experience therapy included physical fitness, outdoor expeditions and project work, in which a student was encouraged to pursue "artistic, technical, socio-ethical or scientific" interests (Rohrs, 1966 27) and service: committed activity which helped others (Knoll, 2011 9). In Hahn's principles, bonded by the glue of international responsibility, the seeds of the IB and, in particular, of CAS are evident, not only in the project and service, but also in the aesthetic and craft-based activities giving rise to 'Creativity'; the physical training and expedition becoming 'Action' and, more recently, 'Activity'. Hahn's legacy in informing the development of the IBDP is particularly evident in the principle of change through active experiences embodied in its CAS component.

During the early days of the IB, concerns were curricular and financial rather than pedagogical, aimed at the establishment of a curriculum with an internationally recognized university entrance qualification. Endorsed in 1970, when the first 20 students were admitted to universities with the International Baccalaureate Diploma (Peterson, 2003 31), the IB's educational approach rejected an "encyclopaedic" curriculum of accumulated facts (39) in favour of one which developed critical thinking within an academic framework. Now as then, this is represented by the Theory of Knowledge, part of a core which also includes CAS and the Extended Essay, and in the grouping of six academic fields operating holistically to develop international-mindedness in IBDP students.

In the context of IB documentation, 'holistic' is used in a variety of ways. It is used synonymously with '*integrated*', as in the sense of interdisciplinary curriculum design (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2009 24); or '*not just one part*' as in the concept of educating the whole person; it can also mean '*balanced*', as is suggested by one of the ten Learner Profile attributes intended to be developed by all IB students (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2008), discouraging obsessive specialism (34), as well as '*balancing*' in the provision of a counterweight which is provided by CAS to the academic aspects of the programme. 'Holistic' can also indicate something akin to '*cohesive*' (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2015 8) with regard to the curriculum or to the inculcation of many attributes, through many activities, in one person. Hare (2011) notes the lack of precision in the way 'holistic' is used by the IB, despite its wide use in the organization's supporting literature, and turns instead to the work of Ron Miller for whom holistic education nurtures the whole person (intellectual, emotional, social, physical, creative/intuitive, aesthetic and spiritual); revolves around egalitarian relationships between learners and teachers; criticizes rather than replicates the cultural, moral and political contexts of life; and focuses on growth through discovery of understanding and meaning arising in life experiences (Miller, 2000 385-387). Despite the diversity of apparent meanings, holistic education connotes the philosophical argument that education is preparation for adult life and positions it in contrast to more instrumentalist views. Echoes of Miller in the ways in which the IB uses 'holistic' resonate with Hahn's view that students can be transformed through experiences, although there is a discernible difference between Hahn's experience therapy – no longer explicit in IB documentation – and learning from experience, which the IB conflates into 'experiential learning'.

### Experiential learning

Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984), developed in explicit contrast to traditional forms of education and drawing on Lewin, Dewey and Piaget, mines their approaches for commonalities to describe an iterative and active process whereby learning is not confined to planned curricular outcomes but "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." (Kolb, 2015 49). Kolb's early work (1984), criticized by Garner (2000), *inter alia*, for the weakness of its claimed correlation with Jung's typologies, categorized students into learning types. Latterly, Kolb developed his position to offer a "holistic, integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition and behaviour" (Kolb, 2015 31). Despite remaining selective of elements from existing theories, Kolb highlights two key ideas which are relevant to the IBDP and, in particular, to CAS: learning is holistic, and learning is transformational. Kolb argues that learning is a whole-body, multi-sensory experience using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) as evidence that learning involves not only brain function, such as episodic memory, but also emotions and physical sensations. Holistic, multi-sensory learning is, he argues, a continuous process of adaptation to the

world occurring through transactions between the person and the environment which results in the creation of knowledge. This 'spiral' process is mobilized by resolution of conflict between action and reflection, and between concrete experience and abstract conceptualization (51), resulting in individual development, or maturation (206), through separate stages Kolb describes as acquisition, specialization and integration. The lifelong process of experiential learning results in a pathway towards "a state of self-actualization, independence, proaction, and self-direction." (205). Reflection is "the internal transformation of an experience" (58), adopted from a model of critical reflection which draws on Taoism (Humphrey, 2009), and which is based on the three stages of reflection (spontaneous observation of direct experiences), reframing (critical examination that produces new perspectives), and reform (a process resulting in change in action). Humphrey's metaphysical approach has clear differences from Kolb's foundations and, although she describes reflection as an activity involving the interplay of dialectics, she expresses this as a process of 'working with', rather than resolving, them (378).

The distinction between experiential and non-experiential learning has been discussed by, *inter alia*, Blenkinsop, Noland, Hunt, Stonehouse, and Telford (2016), who conclude that the distinction is meaningless. Considering the claim that 'traditional' learning is non-experiential, the authors take the case of a lecture which proves an educative experience for one student, noting that its relevance furthers her understanding and, in this sense, is transformational. Kolb's ELT, meanwhile, takes a problematic dualistic stance, somewhat at odds with his holistic assertions, with the individual engaged on a project of self-discovery, seeming separate from historically-evolved knowledge. For example, while speaking of 'interaction' as a fluid relationship between conditions and people which results in both being "essentially changed" (Kolb, 2015), he goes on to write about essential, personal knowledge as an accumulation of life experiences, which *transacts* with social knowledge (48). Kolb is thus preserving a focus on the individual as distinct from their social context, making it difficult to reconcile with the constructivists such as Dewey, Piaget and Bruner with whom he claims to align. When Garner (2000) advises that Kolb's theory be restricted to use as "a tool to encourage self-development of an individual within an academic group or field" (347), he is emphasising the importance of contextualized learning. Although this stance is shared by the IB, exemplified by its statement that CAS, as part of a coherent core, should "support the interconnectedness of learning ... [and] support, and be supported by, the academic disciplines" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2015 3), CAS learning and Kolb's experiential learning are described as a "match" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2011 13). Garner meanwhile sounds a warning note that a decontextualized theory of experience-based learning is just as deficient as academic learning without application to experience.

Aiming to maintain a broadly humanist curriculum, the IB has adopted an association with holistic education, the ideals of education for peace and the learning that can derive from experience. It is not clear how these might transform the individual or what the particular experiences of Creativity, Activity and Service may add. Is the inclusion of experiential learning, as Walker (2011) describes it, an 'act of faith'? A detailed review of literature addressing 16-19 year old adolescents participating in the three elements of creative, physical (activity-related) and service activities outside the formal classroom is beyond the scope of this paper, and can be found elsewhere (Author, 2017). Suffice to say that there exists an extensive literature base relating to all three elements, arising from both empirical and non-empirical studies completed in numerous countries and diverse cultural contexts, and generating varied perspectives on the contribution to be made by these elements to the learning and development of young people and adults across the age range. Here we will consider next a number of empirical studies which have been undertaken to date with a specific focus on CAS in the IB Diploma Programme.

#### Existing Research on CAS

Of the eight empirical studies considered in this review which focused specifically on CAS, during the period between 2002 and 2016, six were based in the IB Africa, Europe and Middle East (IBAEM) region, and one each in the two other IB regions: Asia Pacific (IBAP) and the Americas. Research directly relating to CAS is scarce and has tended to be small-scale, with only two studies collecting data from more than one country and just one drawing data from more than 100 respondents. A homogeneity of methodology is apparent with all the empirical studies using interviews, and four combining these with questionnaires. Research inclines towards school settings, involving CAS students and staff as respondents, although one study focuses on IBDP alumni. Published research in this period operates under two sets of IB guidelines for CAS, the first effective from 1996 and the second from 2008, with a new set of CAS guidelines for IBDP students taking effect in 2015. The following overview of the studies focuses on the findings with particular relevance to the transformative potential of experiential learning which underpins the inclusion of CAS in the IBDP.

Martin, Tanyu, and Perry (2016) investigated variations in CAS delivery related to students' perceptions of CAS. Analysis of staff interviews and student focus groups found that students' positive perceptions increased in schools where CAS was integrated, such as when links were well-established in the community outside the school. Students' perceptions on the voluntary nature of the Service strand were addressed by Hatziconstantis and Kolympari (2016). In this study interviews with three purposively selected IBDP students (described as academically average, good, and excellent) carried out in a single school in Greece concluded that the effectiveness of the Service strand in conveying the aims of the IB was dependent on which of the two dominant theoretical 'dimensions' the students



identified with: the idealistic-humanitarian perspective in which volunteering is understood as selfless and requiring empathy, or the utilitarian-instrumentalist dimension in which volunteering is self-serving and contributory to an “ideology of meritocratic competition” (13) – although neither approach embeds wider social issues related to the over-arching IB aim of promoting international mindedness. Both (Brodie, 2014) and (Perry, 2015) found that students disliked the reflection required as part of the CAS programme, the former analysing fifteen focus group transcripts from students in three schools in Norway, six in the UK and one in Sweden, and the research of the latter based on students in six schools in Turkey. Cambridge and Simandiraki (2006) investigation of intergenerational dimensions of CAS activities and associated learning outcomes in four colleges in England and Wales identified conflicting reasons for students keeping reflective journals: were they for personal reflection or to be used by the school as documentary evidence? The authors commented that, if the latter, documentation may lead to instrumentalism on the part of the students, meaning that reflecting becomes a superficial aspect of experience rather than supporting crucial meaning-making. Given the importance of students making meaning from experiences, resistance to reflecting may indicate an area for investigation of good practice. Where CAS is perceived to be a peripheral element of the IBDP, as found in research in a Lesotho school by Kulundu and Hayden (2002), students may be uncertain of its status: whether a counterbalance to subject studies or a practical link to the DP academic curriculum. This point echoes research in Service learning which found that intentional learning goals have transformational outcomes for the person and the social group to which they belong (Mwaanga & Prince, 2016; Rynne, 2016). Research indicating that CAS was accorded lower priority than examination subjects in China (Wright and Lee (2014), warning that superficial CAS experiences may be related to its (non-graded) pass/fail status, confirms the findings of other research (for example Billig and Good, 2013) that students understand benefits of experiential programmes in terms of development of their individual personal non-cognitive skills. Conflicting motives for experiential learning may offer an explanation: when experiential learning is embedded in an academic programme leading to a university entrance qualification, the emphasis on personal, rather than societal, transformation may be an unsurprising result. However, Lindemann (2012), when surveying 71 IBDP alumni graduating from schools in Brazil between 1997 and 2008, found that the Service strand of CAS was perceived to have some transformational impact. Students’ awareness of socio-economic issues were raised, their view of their own role in promoting social change was transformed, and feelings of empowerment engendered by CAS reportedly led to their increased social, political and civic involvement. Some further investigation of the enduring effects of the CAS programme, as perceived by those who have been awarded the IB Diploma, provides further evidence of the transformational potential of the programme, particularly in relation to the aims of the IB. In

her non-empirical paper, Wasner (2016) argues that CAS, and Service in particular, would benefit from a dialogic pedagogy, with teachers and students companions in knowledge creation to facilitate achievement of the IB's aims. Echoing Hatziconstantis and Kolympari (2016), Wasner criticizes IB terminology for promoting the somewhat passive aim of creating 'awareness' rather than advocating action for change. Wasner re-draws students as inquirers and contends that the requirement to make connections between service experiences and learning in different subject areas should be central to CAS, arguing that "criticality" (9) at every level within a complementary pedagogy would support experiential transformative learning in line with the IBDP curricular aims.

CAS-related research literature reinforces understanding in the findings from the experiential literature: experience has the potential to be transformative if it is meaningful, connected to clear learning goals – either to individuals or with explicit motives of social change, is carried out in collaboration with equal others, and has an integrated element which supports personal sense-making. With these elements, evidence suggests that experiences will not be reduced to brief and superficial encounters which simply reinforce the *status quo*.

## Conclusion

This review of literature has served to underscore the importance of distinguishing between experience and experiential learning. Evidence from literature on experiential learning pertaining to creativity, activity and service shows that there is potential for well-designed experiences to result in personal transformation, resulting in new skills and introducing novel perspectives which can prompt new understandings. There is some evidence that transformation can extend beyond the individual when experiences are motivated by intentional change or when collaborative practices are permitted. Kolb advocates powerful affective physical experience followed by reflection as leading to learning: but learning about what? And reflecting how and about what? Hahn's enduring influence on CAS in the IBDP may also benefit from a robust critique. These approaches draw from fragmented sources and, in addition to the tensions arising from the conflicting motives for participating in CAS which the literature has uncovered, have the combined effect of diluting the transformative potential of experiential learning. Dewey helpfully distinguished experience from educative experience, concentrating on non-routine occurrences which arise on encountering a problem which we must overcome to continue. His cycle of reflective thought and action offers an

explanation of how the problem is the source of the educative experience, and reflection is that which helps to overcome the problem. A favourite amongst scholars of experience in relation to learning, Dewey's contributions must be acknowledged as part of a much larger philosophical standpoint, criticising the American education system as one which perpetuated privileged accounts of knowing and marginalising the child's own learning; Dewey was partly arguing that the student's learning be introduced as a focus point of education (Dewey, 1900). What place did a child's experience of the world have in a curriculum that did not take account of that experience? Dewey warned against demotivation as an outcome, acknowledging the lived experience as a starting point from which a child could come to understand curriculum content should, he argued, be part of an education which relates, pragmatically, to the purpose of education as improving the world and the lives of those in it. The field of experiential learning can be understood as an attempt to prevent children's lived experiences from being swamped by unrelated educational content. Parallels drawn between the social constructivist approaches to learning of Dewey and Vygotsky (Miettinen, 2009; Pritchard, 2017) argue for the importance of the social in individuals' processes of learning and development. Arguably it is even more useful to begin any account of learning which seeks to acknowledge the complexities of a holistically transformational process of physical, affective and cognitive events such as experiential learning by giving it context. Phylogenesis, ontogenesis and microgenesis (Scribner, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978) offer this as, respectively, species-level and sociocultural-level developmental activity unfolding over time, and mediating the sense-making activity of individuals within their own personal history of experiences. The relation of microgenesis to ontogenesis, explained through the use of Vygotsky's concepts of scientific and spontaneous concepts, offers a theory of dialectical process of knowledge creation which fulfils Dewey's demand to place the learner's experience at the start of every educative endeavour.

Whilst a recently developed model of experiential learning suggests that transformative experiential learning must be grounded in social interaction addressing real world problems in challenging settings followed by structured reflection (Pritchard, 2017), the absence of motive in this theory is

notable. The secondary question of the potential of CAS within the IBDP to support transformational learning beyond individual students is complicated by, amongst other things, the tensions existing within the organization (Tarc, 2009), a lack of motivation of a student elite in international schools (where the IBDP is widely offered) to disrupt the *status quo* to their own disadvantage and elevate their experiences of CAS activity beyond “short term *ad hoc* benevolence” (Dunne & Edwards, 2010 35), and superficial experiences exemplified by “voluntourism” (Oliver & Oliel, 2017). The ontogenetic processes of globalization are fundamental in shaping and being shaped by the international education market in which the IBDP operates as currency and the global citizen is a marketable good. A salutary perspective offered by Menezes de Souza (2013) suggests that notions of world belonging are another Eurocentric concept which “seen from the perspective of the global South are one more attempt at exclusion.” (ix). Hahn may have asserted that it was not enough to think, one also had to act (Peterson, 2003), but his advocacy for the principles of transformative experience were directed towards the principle of a more peaceful world. If the IB is to maintain its commitment to experiential learning and the principles of Kurt Hahn, and avoid the potential for accusations of superficiality it must, as suggested by Tarc (2013) and Wasner (2016), develop more explicit theoretically robust pedagogies to underpin its aims for this core aspect of its programmes.

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